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THE PROBLEM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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But when the dogmatic authority of the Old Testament has been rejected, is there anything left worth fighting for? Indeed there is. Now begins to emerge in clear relief the immense *historical* importance of the Old Testament. The Old Testament contains those documents which are the indispensable sources for our knowledge of the foundation and significance of our religion. They thus have a unique historical significance. The Fathers employed arguments in defense of the Old Testament against the Gnostics which have no weight with us. Nevertheless, they were right in their main contentions and the Gnostics were wrong. The Fathers recognized the fact that Christianity is a historical religion. As such it strikes its roots deep into the soil of the Past. The Old Testament is its great tap-root. If the Gnostics had succeeded, the ax would have been laid at the root of the tree. If the Old Testament had been cut away Christianity would have been sublimated into philosophical speculations, as the history of Gnosticism clearly showed, and the multitudes cannot breathe in the high altitudes of pure philosophy.

But it may be objected that this is just the sort of an academic consideration which one might look for from a prig of a professor, with his far-away interest in origins and his failure to appreciate the vital needs of men today. But wait a moment. Let us look at the *spiritualized doctrine of inspiration* that grows out of the new conceptions. On the traditional theory, inspiration was seen to be an impersonal, non-moral thing. The question of inspiration was insensibly identified with the question of the inspiration of a book. On the historical theory of the Old Testament, the question is shifted away from the book to the men behind the book. As soon as that is done inspiration is personalized and therefore moralized.

On the dogmatic theory the chief function of inspiration is the authentication of truth. Things in the Bible are true because the pen-men of the Holy Ghost, as they have been called (that is, the biblical writers are stenographers, not authors, on this theory) wrote them down at the dictation of the Spirit. This position is absurd. Moral and spiritual truth is self-authenticating. It does not need inspired authentication. As for historical facts, such authentication is as irrelevant as for the facts of chemistry or physics. On the historical theory, the function of inspiration is the discovery of truth when the soul in contact with its God can discern the outlines of the spiritual world, can feel the reality of the things unseen. In other words, inspiration is a great spiritual experience. It is something human and vital. This means that the authority of the inspired prophet is no longer something wholly external and therefore tyrannical, as it was on the old dogmatic view. It is the authority of a great throbbing human experience which may be duplicated, at least in a measure, in the experience of others, and hence no longer remains an external authority.

In the next place the Old Testament read from the historical, instead of from the dogmatic, point of view is everywhere shimmering in a new beauty, is everywhere instinct with life and power. There are the stories of Genesis, for example. On the dogmatic view they must be construed as actual history. The result is as deadly as it would be to study Homer solely with reference to the historicity of the Trojan war. We might gain a few shreds and patches of history, but that would be a beggarly exchange for the poetry we had lost. There was once an old Greek teacher who used to insist, when Homer was being studied, that *chalkos* should always be translated "bronze," not "brass." That was more important than the pathos of Andromache's farewell to Hector. On the dogmatic view, the correctness of the etymology of Abraham's name becomes a matter of faith. The historical view sees in these stories not authentic history but legend. Every canon of literary criticism demands this recognition. Does this discredit them? On the contrary, only when they are so interpreted can they reveal themselves to the interpreter in their true beauty and significance. Construed on the dogmatic theory as veritable

history, they must subject themselves, poor things, to the tests of veritable history. They must be compared with Grote or Busolt or even Thucydides. How eminently unfair to them this is, is obvious.

As legends they belong to a distinct, well-recognized species of literature which develops at a certain stage in the history of every people and expresses the inmost soul of the people in its youth. Of them it may be said with added meaning, "The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts." To force the dreams of youth into the syllogisms of maturity is brutal. To test the legends of Genesis by the works of modern science is a barbarous anachronism. It is only when the folk-lore of Israel is compared with the folk-lore of other peoples that justice can be done to it. When such a comparison is made, we begin to realize for the first time the immeasurable superiority of these folk-tales of the ancient Hebrews to the tales of all other peoples of antiquity. They do not have, it is true, the beautiful rainbow colors of the Greek mythology. No lovely Iris, no rosy-fingered Dawn, no far-darting Apollo, no Aphrodite rising from the foam, gleam through these legends. But they have a beauty of form, a refinement of feeling, a naïve gravity which are as exquisite in their own way as any tale of Hellas. And they have something which Greek mythology, by the very terms of it, does not possess: a purity in their conception of God which has banished the grotesque, the gross, and the defiling, and which has surrounded these child's stories with all the clouds of solemn glory, the mystery and awe of life that properly belong to every child. Because of this the stories of Genesis remain the best introduction for the child into the deeper things of the religious life and it is sad to think how many of us are depriving our children of this priceless heritage.¹

Or look again at the first chapter of Genesis, which, by the way, is not, in its present form, to be interpreted as folk-lore. On the dogmatic view the chapter must be geologically correct. On the

¹ If one wishes to form a judgment upon the literary suitability of the legends of Genesis for the child, let him make a comparison of style, vocabulary, and subject-matter of Jacob's dream at Bethel with the dream of Florian in Walter Pater's *Child in the House*. The one is as simple and elemental as Haydn's music. The other is as full of subtlety as the music of DuBussy.

basis of the geological interpretation demanded by the dogmatic view, the church has opposed many of the most important discoveries of modern science. In the confusion of the struggle the spiritual import of the chapter has been almost totally ignored. On the historical view of the Bible the geology of Genesis is seen to be erroneous. Its physical conceptions are essentially those of Babylonian priestly science and no one would think of rectifying the findings of Greenwich or the Lick Observatory by the views entertained in the temple of Esag-ila. But when the common physical background of the Babylonian and Hebrew cosmologies is once recognized, the religious superiority of the first chapter of Genesis is pushed into the foreground. In the Babylonian epic of Creation, with which Gen., chap. 1, is usually compared, the interest is scientific and political. It will tell how the world was created, but it describes the creation in such a way as to give all glory to Marduk, the god of Babylon, and to support the political supremacy which Babylon gained at the time of the Hammurabi Dynasty by the cosmological significance attributed to Marduk, Babylon's god. The purpose of Gen., chap. 1, is religious. Incidentally it teaches science, too, the accepted science of its day. But this is not its purpose. Its purpose is to teach religion in the terms of the science of its day. In so doing the writer is the forerunner of Clement of Alexandria, of Origen, of all the great Christian thinkers who have sought to interpret the deepest truths of our religion in the terms of accepted knowledge and thus connect them vitally with life. When we turn from the aim of the two cosmologies to their details, how superior is the Hebrew account again seen to be! In the Babylonian account there is first a chaos and then a birth of the gods. In the Hebrew account God is no "tawny lion pawing to be free" of the primeval elements. Chaos is there, no doubt, but its troubled waters are not fiercely beating against the barriers of the heavenly world and threatening to overthrow them. God is absolutely untrammelled and transcendent. In the Babylonian account there is the grossest polytheism. The gods in their assemblage get drunk most royally. In the Hebrew account the old assemblage of the gods may still, possibly, be seen in the background (in the much discussed "we" of vs. 26),

but the conception that dominates the chapter is the conception of the oneness of God. In the one account creation is described in the most mythological terms. It is a struggle between the gods of light and order against the monstrous powers of darkness and anarchy. In Genesis God speaks and it is done. There is no struggle, no effort here, only the calm of absolute power, the effortlessness of omnipotence. The exalted religious conceptions of God have even had a restraining influence upon the physical conceptions which Gen., chap. 1 shares with the older account. All the original exaggerations and grotesqueness have been eliminated. At this point a genuine scientific value can be vindicated for the Hebrew cosmology if we look for it in the right place. The writer views the world as an ordered world, a kosmos. Each stage of the creation develops after its kind, in accordance with its own laws. There is no caprice or magic here, no marvel except the marvel of ordered beauty, the beauty of science to which religion has given a spiritual meaning.

Let us look at one other instance of the change effected by the new attitude toward Scripture. The dogmatic view of prophecy laid all the emphasis upon the predictive element. This it felt compelled to do because the New Testament writers themselves laid the emphasis upon this element. But the historical method of interpreting the Old Testament compels us to admit, what Calvin already seemed to realize in a measure, that the coincidences which are found between prophecy and specific events in Jesus' life are illusory. They can be pointed out only by means of the allegorical method which the New Testament writers, as children of their day, naturally availed themselves of. (Remember, it was at that time the approved method of elucidating sacred books.) But the emphasis upon prediction ignores the moral significance of prophecy. In order to secure the required meaning for the prophetic utterances which would enable them to be regarded as specific predictions concerning Jesus of Nazareth, they must be isolated from their contexts and from the historical occasions which gave rise to them. This means that they lose all moral significance for those to whom they were originally spoken. Construed as predictions, the prophecies were originally enigmas, a term which

the Fathers were significantly fond of applying to them, and the prophets must have been to those whom they addressed as men speaking with tongues. Paul says that he would rather speak five words with his understanding than ten thousand words in a tongue. The historical view of prophecy follows the lead of St. Paul. Instead of the prophetic enigma it substitutes the prophetic sermon. Instead of predictions as ambiguous as the Delphic oracles with which Clement of Alexandria expressly compares them, it substitutes the conception of prophecy as a great organic movement of spiritual reform, developing through the centuries. Instead of emphasizing Isa. 7:14 ("A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and call his name Immanuel") and ruthlessly slaying the meaning of the passage, as even Calvin did, in order to present it as a sacrifice to the dogmatic theory of Scripture, the historical interpretation points to the verse just preceding, "If you do not believe, you will not be established." It is that verse that gives to the meeting between Ahab and Isaiah its permanent significance.

I do not intend to break down the connection between prophecy and fulfilment when I suggest that the time passed has sufficed us to look for the fulfilments of predictions or to delight in the isolated correspondences which they imply. There is, I apprehend, a more vital connection between Jesus and prophecy than the older view has usually suggested. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, not because he fulfils predictions—that has no moral significance—but because he fulfils prophetic ideals. That has the deepest moral significance. And what are these ideals? The answer to this question leads to the very heart of the Old Testament and it is here that we come to realize its abiding value.

The first of these ideals is the thought of God as a God of the Kosmos, one and transcendent. This finds its classic formulation in the first chapter of Genesis. This chapter stands out as the magna charta of ethical monotheism, a bulwark against the polytheism and the pantheism of the ancient world, and all the ethical and spiritual confusion which they inevitably produced. The second ideal is the conception of the God of the Kosmos as the God of history. To the former conception parallels may be found

in other nations, though vastly inferior to it in dignity and purity. The latter conception is probably unique among the religions of antiquity. As a God of history the God of the prophets is a person in a sense in which no mere nature god or pale derivative of astral speculation is capable of being. He is a living God, no wraith. As personally interested in human history he is in moral relations with mankind. He is a God of righteousness, no capricious jinn. At first, it is true, his primary relationships were conceived to be with Israel with whom he entered into a covenant. A strange idea, this idea of a covenant! But the more one ponders it, the more its ethical significance is realized. And this idea seems to have been an original element in the national religion. But, as time went on, the universalistic implications, which were probably present from the beginning in Israel's conception of God, were more and more fully revealed. Jehovah brings Israel out of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Aramaeans from Kir. In all these widening relationships He does not lose his concreteness. His will is not merely the symbol for what is. He is as vitally personal as ever, and his righteousness is even more intensely realized. He will punish the sinning nation wherever it may be found. But as a God of history, a personal ethical power, his relationships are not confined to past or present, for history has a future also. He becomes the God of faith and hope. Thus the prophetic conception of God as the God of history culminates in that sublime and optimistic philosophy of history which we call Messianic prophecy, in which all the tangled threads of human life are seen to be finally woven into the banner of the church triumphant.

There is yet another ideal, in some respects the most important of all. The God who is the creator of the world, the God who is the God of human history, a personal, ethical power in the movements of the nations, is the God of the individual conscience as well. As gradually all nationalistic conceptions of God were transcended and in Second Isa. and Gen., chap. 1, the universalistic conception of him received its classic formulation, we observe the corollary of these ideals also emerging. Our relationship to a world-God, who is a God of righteousness, cannot be determined by racial connection or by climate, by birth or by inheritance. It

can be determined only by our own wills moving out spontaneously toward his will. Individualism,² which is the final stage in the spiritualization of religion, appears in striking forms in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and experiences its transfiguration in Jonah and in Job.

These are the ideals of the religion of Israel as developed by its great prophetic teachers. These are the ideals which Christ fulfils by supplying the thought of fatherhood to the thought of the creator, by supplementing the ideal of righteousness with the ideal of love, by insisting on the worth of the individual soul even to the point that the whole world is to be sacrificed to save it. These ideals of prophecy are true, everlastingly true, and no rejection of a dogmatic theory of Scripture can undermine them. It is these ideals which give to the Old Testament its true authority and abiding worth. It must be frankly admitted that the transition from the old theories to the new costs something. It seems at times as if everything were being given up. So it seemed to many in the Reformation when the only authority with which the people were acquainted, namely the authority of the church, was broken down. So it seemed to Job, who took the step which is the supreme effort of vital religion and maintained the truth of his convictions against the dogmas of his day. For a time it seemed as if he had lost everything. God threatened to become to him only a cruel demon. But if this greatest Protestant of the Old Testament, this champion of the rights of the individual conscience against the authority of tradition as represented by the dogma of his friends, had not ventured all, and denied the God in whom he had once believed, he would never have found the God of righteousness and love. If he had never left the old trail, he would not have discovered that mountain top of spiritual experience from which he obtained the vision of the world to come, where truth is vindicated and faith secured against all doubt forever.

² Individualism in religion is not to be confounded with Egoism. The former is perfectly compatible with social responsibilities. The latter is not.